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How to avoid being sucked into the black hole of administration

Bureaucracy is the bane of every academic's life. But who is to blame for its proliferation – and how can it be kept in check? Six academics have their say – while a registrar offers an equal and opposite reaction

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By [Kate Cantrell](/author/kate-cantrell), [Lee Cronin](/author/lee-cronin), [Paul Greatrix](/author/paul-greatrix), [David Palumbo-Liu](/author/david-palumbo-liu), [Emily Michelson](/author/emily-michelson), [Dennis Tourish](/author/dennis-tourish) and [Michael Filimowicz](/author/michael-filimowicz)

Twitter: [@kate_cantrell](https://twitter.com/kate_cantrell), [@leecronin](https://twitter.com/leecronin), [@registrarism](https://twitter.com/registrarism), [@palumboliu](https://twitter.com/palumboliu) and [@Emily_Michelson](https://twitter.com/Emily_Michelson)



Basic physics

I'll admit that my knowledge of physics is largely confined to the theme song of *The Big Bang Theory*. Increasingly, however, I find myself staring into the electronic time suck that is my email inbox and thinking about Einstein's theory of general relativity. I wonder, in particular, if he was thinking of academia when he proposed that while the universe is finite, it has no limits.



Source: Getty/iStock montage

Certainly, time seems to warp into something akin to jelly when 349 emails spring up overnight. Some of these requests are easily resolved: a seating disruption in the refec (no action required); a book contract from a scam publisher (delete); an invite to the annual Turnitin Conference (delete and block). Other emails, however, are not straightforward. This morning, for example, I received five "urgent" requests before my first class (which, by the way, is a 9am tutorial):

- An online order form from the campus bookshop. “Barbara Baynton is out of print. Can you please set a different text? Perhaps something we’ve purchased previously? Something with reusability? *The Great Gatsby*, perhaps?” The course in question is *Australian Stories*.
- A timetabling request from admin. “Your Friday class is over-subscribed. Would you like to increase the quota, and if so, by how much? A second class is possible, but it will require a minimum enrolment of ten to be viable.”
- A courtesy reminder from an over-ambitious first year. “Just following up on the essay plan that I sent you on Sunday night. I’m aiming for 100%, so hopefully I’m on the right track? I also have some questions about Shakespeare and his metrical deviations. Is it possible to arrange a phone call with you to talk through the irregularities of iambic pentameter?”
- A date claimer for the faculty breakfast. “Please click on the link below to register.” The link in the email doesn’t work.
- A meeting request from Alex in Outreach & Events. “As you know, it was Open Day yesterday, and it’s come to our attention that we accidentally sent you the wrong polo shirt (men’s, extra-large). It would be great if we could meet, briefly, to discuss why the mix-up occurred. If you have a moment, we’ve also included a feedback survey. Tell us: how did we do?”

The above would be funny if it weren’t for the fact that reading and replying to emails has become the primary form of academic labour. Admin, and its panoply of pain, is the most pressing demand on my time. It is, in Einstein’s words, a colossal black hole from which nothing – not even light – can escape. Even messages that can’t be delivered bounce back.

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The problem, then, is a perceptual illusion: how do we measure what we can't see? And how do we manage things that aren't measured? For every type of visible work that I do (for example, delivering a lecture), there is a disproportionate amount of "invisible" work that I must donate in order to complete the task on time (moderating papers, entering grades, reviewing coursework, attending meetings, updating software, digitalising resources, organising field trips...the list goes on). This admin work is not an optional add-on: it is, in fact, the work you must do in order to do your work.

If you're in casual, hourly paid employment, the other problem is not an unsustainable workload, but, rather, the fact that you don't have a service workload at all. Not officially, at least. But while your students (bless them) will assess you on the quality of your teaching, they will mostly judge your email response time.

When I first started tutoring, I used to worry that my reputation for ridiculously fast replies would, as one colleague warned, contribute to a toxic culture of overwork and unrealistic expectations. Now, when I open my inbox and begin the scroll of doom, I ask myself: "When it is too late to reply to an email?"

As an early career academic, the reality is that on most days, I spend more time “doing email” than doing research. This seems to me a heavy bureaucratic burden: one that is reflective, no doubt, of my own lack of e-resilience, but one that is more symptomatic of a workplace where the constant injunction is to be productive – to publish or perish, to be discoverable or die – in a system that is not only structurally boundless but where work, by extension, is potentially infinite.

I suppose, as Einstein said, it’s basic physics.

Kate Cantrell teaches creative writing and English literature at the University of Southern Queensland (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-southern-queensland>).
